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Dick Walters' 'Resignation'

When Gen. Vernon A. Walters handed Secretary of State George Shultz a letter Monday "resigning" as President Reagan's choice for U.N. ambassador because of limitations the secretary had imposed on him, a startled Shultz waved it off with the remark: "I'm not empowered to act on that."

If Shultz had accepted the letter, he would have run afoul of the president, who very much wanted Walters to succeed Jeane Kirkpatrick at the United Nations. If he had refused it, he would have run the risk of Walters' getting the right to attend National Security Council meetings.

As it turns out, Walters will succeed Kirkpatrick with the status of the job (including attendance at NSC meetings) undiminished, as he had been promised when first offered it. But in most areas, Shultz and his allies in the Foreign Service bureaucracy have been winning their struggle for a traditional foreign policy controlled by the career service.

That battle has added new tension to the relationship between secretary of state and U.N. ambassador, strained since Dwight Eisenhower elevated the status of Henry Cabot Lodge in 1953. The difficulty of treating a subordinate as a Cabinet and NSC colleague was enlarged when Kirkpatrick evolved as the conservative movement's militantly anti-communist answer to State Department caution.

Relief at State over Kirkpatrick's departure has been mitigated by the identity of her successor.

Dick Walters, who began his diplomatic career as Richard Nixon's interpreter and has flourished as Ronald Reagan's troubleshooter, has all the potential of becoming a darling of the right, equally as troublesome to the elite corps of foreign policy officers as Kirkpatrick. Consequently, word was leaked months ago that Kirkpatrick's successor would sit on neither the Cabinet nor the National Security Council.

Efforts to reduce Walters from Cabinet status failed quickly, but ambiguities arose about his participation in NSC deliberations (where the president makes major national security decisions). On March 22, Walters went to the White House to see NSC Director Robert D. McFarlane in hopes of clearing away those ambiguities.

While waiting in the lobby, Walters was informed that "the president is ready to talk to you" on the telephone. Amazed, he picked up the phone and for the first time was officially asked by the president himself to take the U.N. job.

Minutes later, McFarlane received Walters and informed him of the decision, privately reached by Shultz and the White House excluding Walters from regular NSC attendance. Having just told Reagan himself that he accepted the job, Walters wondered how he could now refuse. He forced the issue three days later by handing his "resignation" to Shultz.

Walters really did want out when he handed Shultz that letter. Indeed, had it not been for private counsel from no less than Richard Nixon, George Bush and William Casey, he might have yielded to despondency and really walked away.

Instead, he followed Nixon's advice to "hang tough." From Vice President Bush and Casey, former and present directors of the CIA (where Walters served Nixon as deputy director), came quiet encouragement. When Shultz lobbied the president to keep Walters out of the Cabinet as the first step toward blocking him from the NSC, Bush "wouldn't buy it," one high-level presidential adviser told us.

At mid-morning Tuesday, the day after Walters handed his letter to Shultz, he was telephoned by McFarlane. Walters would have exactly the same status as Kirkpatrick, McFarlane told him. That was not full membership (there are only four statutory NSC members) but would mean fairly regular attendance at meetings.

Since that is all Walters ever asked, the battle over status and turf that almost unhinged one of Reagan's better appointments has ended its first phase. The cause of that struggle lies not only in the peculiarity of a single, unique ambassador with policy-making powers but also in the secretary's determination to conduct an orderly foreign policy with the help of the career service.

Walters' sitting regularly at the NSC table continues to threaten Shultz's objective. That explains why the tense backstage events of the last week are likely to be repeated in the future.

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